U.S. Navy Submarine USS Bugara (SS-331)

Early History

U.S. Navy submarine Bugara (SS-331), named for a saltwater fish species found off the coast of California, was laid down on October 21, 1943, at the Electric Boat Company in Groton, Connecticut. The Balao-class submarine was launched on July 2, 1944, sponsored by Mrs. Anna Perry, wife of Captain Lyman Perry, who served as aide to the Secretary of the Navy. Commissioned on November 15, 1944, Commander Arnold Schade served as the first commanding officer of USS Bugara. The submarine departed for the Pacific Ocean on December 25.

In February 1945, Bugara commenced war patrols in the Java, Flores and South China seas, and the Gulf of Siam. While in the Gulf of Siam, Bugara disrupted the junk trade on the Bangkok-Singapore route. It went on to destroy 12 junks, a Terengganu junk, 24 schooners, and 16 coasters, one naval auxiliary and three sea trucks with its deck gun, totaling 5,284 tons. Its sailors boarded all the vessels, with the exception of two, transporting the native crews to safety along with their personal belongings. Bugara later encountered Malay pirates attacking a Japanese schooner, manned by a Chinese crew that was en route to Singapore. As the submarine was approaching the scene, the pirates fled.

The Chinese crew was grateful to be rescued, having had two of their crewmen already killed by the pirates. The pirates were hunted down and destroyed, along with the Japanese schooner. When the war ended during its third patrol, Bugara was ordered to Fremantle, Australia, where the crew got a short period of leave. USS Bugara (SS-331) received three battle stars for its service in World War II and Commander Arnold Schade was awarded the Bronze Star medal.

USS Bugara (SS-331) - World War II

Nationality: American
Class: Balao diesel-electric submarine
Owner: U.S. Navy
Hull Material: Steel
Propulsion: Four each General Motors Model 16-278A, V16 diesel engines driving electrical generators
Displacement Tons: 1,526 surface
Displacement Tons: 2,424 submerged
Length: 311-feet 9-inches
Beam: 27-feet 3-inches
Draft: 16-feet 10-inches
Speed: Knots 20.25 surface 8.75 submerged
Cruising Range: 11,000 miles
Armament: 10 21-inch torpedo tubes, six forward and four aft. A 5-inch 25 caliber gun, with a second gun installed on after deck in 1945. Bofors 40mm and Oerlikon 20mm cannons
Complement: Approximately 10 officers and 71 enlisted
Test Depth: 400 feet

USS Bugara founders off Cape Flattery, Washington

On June 1, 1971, the U.S. Navy tug Cree (ATF-45) had the ex-USS Bugara under tow en route from the Naval Ammunition Depot at Bremerton, Washington, to a disposal site approximately 100 miles off of Cape Flattery. The submarine was to participate in a live-warhead evaluation of the Mark 48 torpedo as a target vessel. Off Cape Flattery, near the mouth of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the submarine began to take on water in the stern and started to settle lower into the Pacific Ocean. With USS Cree at risk of being pulled under, the steel hawser cable was cut. Bugara founded shortly after. According to the Oregonian: “Lt. H. L. Matson of the Thirteenth Naval District said Bugara was believed to be resting on the bottom and posed no danger to navigation. No one was aboard the submarine when it went down. Three antisubmarine warfare destroyers, two minesweepers and antisubmarine warfare aircraft participated at different times during the week-long search. ‘We know where it is – it’s just a matter of time until we pinpoint it.’” That same month the U.S. Navy located Bugara, stating there would be no attempt to raise it.

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Photo: Naval History and Heritage Command

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Post World War II

Following the war, USS Bugara spent time in Subic Bay in the Philippine Islands with other units of its squadron. In January 1946, it departed for San Diego, California, via Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Upon arrival, some of the crew was discharged from the navy while others were ordered to other duty in the Submarine Force. Returning to Pearl Harbor, on May 28, Bugara sank the ex-Japanese submarine I-24 with a Mark 10-3 exploder torpedo warhead.

After a routine overhaul at the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard, Bugara conducted a training mission in the Bering Sea and was involved in rescuing three crew members of a BSP army barge that was adrift. After a visit to Seattle, Washington and Portland, Oregon, the submarine returned to Pearl Harbor. In 1947, during an exercise with the USS Bergall (SS-320) and USS Brill (SS-330), they successfully made four mock attacks on the USS Iowa (BB-61). Over the next few years, Bugara was involved in training exercises off Hawaii, Midway Atoll, Guam, Australia, Okinawa, China, Japan, Samoa, and California.

In 1950, Bugara departed for the Far East to support United Nations Forces in the Korean Campaign. The stay was cut short while in Yokosuka, Japan, when a frigate rammed the submarine, requiring Bugara to return to Pearl Harbor for repairs. Bugara eventually returned to the Far East in January 1951.

Fleet Snorkel Refit

Bugara returned to Pearl Harbor in June of 1951 for its fourth overhaul since it was launched in 1944. Bugara received a Fleet Snorkel conversion, and recognized as a special class submarine. This was the first such conversion for the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard. The conversion installed a distinctive streamline sail, and the deck guns were removed. The submarine also received air conditioning and electrical systems upgraded.

In 1953, Bugara was seriously damaged during a training mission when struck by the destroyer USS Whitehurst (DE-634) near Pearl Harbor. The impact caused the submarine to roll severely and enter into an uncontrolled descent. The crew managed to regain control of the downward plunge and surfaced the submarine. The sail and periscopes were damaged, and it took several weeks to repair.

For the next 10 years Bugara continued training throughout the Pacific. In April 1964, Bugara departed for WestPac and duty with the U.S. Seventh Fleet. It traveled to the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Japan rendering services in the Western Pacific. Bugara was the first American submarine to patrol the Gulf of Tonkin in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed by the U.S. Congress. The resolution resulted in significant escalation of U.S. activities in the Vietnam War. Commemorating Bugara’s 21st birthday on November 15, 1965, the submarine made its 6000th dive. In June 1969, Bugara was reclassified as (AGSS-331), no longer a combat submarine, but three months later was reclassified back to (SS-331). That same year the submarine made its 7000th dive. On October 1, 1970, USS Bugara was decommissioned at Mare Island, California.

Ex-USS Bugara Rediscovery

In 2001, during a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) fiber optic cable survey, the ex-USS Bugara wreck site was confirmed. A 45-minute non-archeological reconnaissance inspection of the exterior hull was conducted. The survey results will be compared to the E/V Nautilus ROV survey planned for 2017, comparing possible changes in the hull over a 16-year span.

E/V Nautilus ROV Survey 2017

NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries has teamed up with Ocean Exploration Trust to explore marine ecosystems along the West Coast from Canada to the Mexico. Working aboard the Exploration Vessel (E/V) Nautilus, scientists are mapping and exploring targets, including those found in Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary. The first archaeological survey of the USS Bugara will be conducted on August 25 and will include scientists, archaeologists, historians, educators, and subject matter experts from across the nation via satellite. The survey dive will be livestreamed through nautiluslive.org.

Site Management and Protection

The U.S. Navy has retained title and ownership of the ex-USS Bugara and provides protection under the Sunken Military Craft Act. USS Bugara is located inside Washington state waters and within the federally protected waters of NOAA’s Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary. Washington state and the National Marine Sanctuaries Act extends protection for the archaeological remains of the wreck site.

sanctuaries.noaa.gov/maritime